

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

November 09, 2017

The Honorable David Shulkin
Secretary of Veterans Affairs
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary Shulkin,

We are writing to express our deep concern about the quality of care at our Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) medical centers in Texas. The recently published Department of Veterans Affairs Strategic Analytics for Improvement and Learning (SAIL) Report rated three Texas VA medical centers with the lowest possible score on the annual quality rating review. Since approximately one in twelve U.S. veterans lives in the state of Texas, amounting to nearly 1.5 million veterans in total, and these medical centers provide care to a large number of those veterans, these findings demonstrate a systemic failure to care for our veterans. It is critical for the VA to improve the quality of care at these medical centers immediately.

According to the report's findings, three VA medical centers in Texas received a one-star rating out of a possible five-star rating. Two of these hospitals, the West Texas VA Health Care System (Big Spring) and the El Paso VA Health Care System received the lowest possible score for a second consecutive year. The VA Health Care Center at Harlingen dropped from a two-star, the second lowest rating, last year, to a one-star, the lowest rating, this year. This is particularly alarming for Texas veterans considering the report shows net improvements in 64% of medical centers nationally.

Below are some findings from the VA's latest SAIL report for the Big Spring, El Paso, and Harlingen. We found the following items to be particularly troubling:

- Big Spring received scores below the 10th percentile with a total of 16 of 24 graded areas falling below the 50th percentile. Areas below the 10th percentile included Mental Health and Patient Experience, as well as Mental Health Population Coverage, and Ratings of Primary Care Providers.
- El Paso received nine graded areas below the 10th percentile, with a total of 19 of 24 graded areas falling below the 50th percentile. Areas below the 10th percentile included Mental Health Care Transitions, as well as registered nurse turnover and efficiency.
- Harlingen scored slightly better, receiving only four points below the 10th percentile, with a total of 13 of 24 falling below the 50th percentile. Even with slightly better overall scores, Harlingen scored below the 10th percentile in Care Transitions, Patient Experience, and Ambulatory Care-Sensitive Condition (ACSC) Hospitalization.

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- All three centers showed low scores in overall rating of primary care and specialty providers, Patient-Centered Medical Home (PCMH) timely appointment care and information, and efficiency.

As the United States enters its 16th year of conflict, our servicemembers and their families continue to bear the burden of high operational tempo and continued deployments. We must ensure that they have access to high-quality care when they return home. The VA's SAIL report for the West Texas region clearly demonstrates that Texas veterans are not receiving that care. In light of these findings, we respectfully request answers to the following questions:

1. Considering the West Texas VA Health Care System (Big Spring) and the El Paso VA Health Care System received the lowest possible score for a second consecutive year, what changes were made to improve the quality of care at those medical centers since the previous year's report? How do you judge the effectiveness of those changes?
2. Has the VA conducted a root cause analysis to determine the reasons for the low quality of care at Big Spring, El Paso, and Harlingen? If so, please explain the findings and actions.
3. What is the VA's strategy for turning around the lowest-performing medical centers in this report? Please provide specific plans for the three Texas medical centers.
4. What immediate steps have you taken to improve the quality of primary and specialty care, PCMH timely appointment care and information, and efficiency in the West Texas region?
5. How do areas graded in the lower 10th percentile at each of the three identified VA medical centers compare with their commercial equivalent in the surrounding communities?
6. What, if any, current policies or laws inhibit the VA's ability to expeditiously improve quality of care and overall rankings of these medical centers?

At the beginning of your tenure, you committed to making the VA "the most transparent organization in government." We commend you for this effort and understand the SAIL report demonstrates your commitment to that pledge. However, we must turn that transparency and these findings into meaningful institutional changes in order to provide veterans with the quality care they deserve.

Thank you in advance for looking into these matters and your continued commitment to caring for our nation's veterans. We look forward to your prompt response.

Sincerely,


JOHN CORNYN
United States Senator


TED CRUZ
United States Senator